From the field it was easy to see that the prime directive was again in danger of being bent. The Romulans weren't hesitant about rearranging things to suit themselves, and there were three cruiser-class starships in the sector. Aware of how such a suggestion would be received, Kirk didn't waste time urging Starfleet to do the obvious and send a mission down to the inhabited Ixmahx world, he simply set up three different versions of a rescue mission in his head and waited for orders to come through.

He worked himself almost to the dropping point, but the easy power of T'serek's controlled movement haunted him, even in his dreams. The textures of his hair, his moist skin, that clear, honest glance obtruded themselves on Kirk's attention at the most inopportune moments. He kicked himself for the unguarded lapse that had brought it about and felt a surge of pride for the boy's courage. He took a course of hard exercise and cold showers, but nothing helped. T'serek moved through the jungles of his mind like the proverbial tiger--threat, challenge, promise--and forbidden.

He went through a solitary stage in which he even avoided Spock. There was no reason, really. Spock wasn't going to read his mind and go into Victorian shock, but Spock's very reserve made him more aware of Dray's coltish dignity.

When he became uncomfortably aware of being under McCoy's scrutiny he launched a program of conviviality. In better times he had enjoyed the ship's social functions, and he followed up rumors of a luau in the lab, hoping for diversion.

It was the kind of party he liked best, everybody shoptalking excitedly over some discovery by a mousey little technician and paying no special attention to him until a strong feminine hand came over his shoulder with an undecorated drink. He turned and surrendered the exotic mixture someone had dipped him out of the punchbowl.

A tall woman with dark brown hair and intense blue eyes was smiling at him, laugh lines creasing around her eyes.

"Nadia! I didn't know <u>you</u> went in for drunken brawling."

"That depends on who else is brawling. Sundersun's my sub and she's done a fine piece of work." She set his fancy drink aside on a lab bench. "Still, I'd stay away from the warp eleven punch if I were you."

He raised his glass, saluting their last meeting. "Here's to hangovers--and home remedies," he said, but his color was a little high. He had once awakened in Nadia's bed, and his surprise hadn't been very flattering to her. She was older than he, a strong, reserved woman with big bones and banked fires. Not only had she failed to get insulted or put him down for inferior performance (see what comes of fruit juice and fancy liquor), but she had been genuinely concerned about his pounding head. On occasion it was nice to be mothered.

He drank the toast and smiled at her over the glass, remembering the headache cure, and she began to blush, too.

"Well, it worked," she said a little defensively.

He watched the blush spread. Funny how a competent lab chief could deal with death and destruction every day, and then produce a blush like that.

"Do you practice preventive medicine, too?"

"No, I mean, I--" She didn't know what to say. She had been so careful not to expect-- His back was to the room, but she must be showing everything, tears in her eyes like a silly schoolgirl. She pulled herself together, resenting his slightly malicious grin. With all the dignity she could muster, she said, "First you should go. Later I will come."

"Bull," said the Captain and took her arm.

The comfort of a woman's body, the silk and satin of it, the wealth of swelling curves. Nadia turned and arched under his hands, sighing, kissing his throat, his shoulder, her breath warm in the dark. Urgency gathering, sweet confrontation of bodies, struggle, submission, buttery yielding, willing, needful acceptance of his plundering manhood. Could another man give him that? Could he give that to a man? He faltered and shook with a nervous chill. Had it already unmanned him?

"Nadia--"

"Hush," she whispered, pulling him close. "Hush." Wise hands turned them onto their sides, still joined, stroked, comforted. "Rest."

Cradeled against her, he could hear his blood pulse like surf in his ears, waves of a distant sea. He felt lost in a vast dark, moonless, starless. Her breathing rocked him, her heart jarred under his lips. Deep inside her a mothwing fluttered against him and sudden sweet pain surged through him, down his spine from his scalp, up the backs of his thighs from his heels, bursting the dam, exploding in violent spasms, spending his strength, his self, into a deep dark gulf beyond self or knowledge of self.

They drifted together, intimate and casual as survivors of the same shipwreck. When she stirred the cool air flowed between them and she shivered back against him, pulling him close.

"That was the sweetest time of all," she said before she slept.

But T'serek would not be so easily banished. Exorcised one way, he drew attention in another. It was a rough sector. His name kept showing up in the reports. On Gamma Hydrae IV he cooly faced a charge of the Yeti-like dominant species, firing into their faces while his chief bullied and dragged a dozen wounded men to the safety of the shuttle.

"He planted himself like a wall," was Lapsley's report. "He was still firing when they were four feet away; there was nothing I could do to help him. If they'd gotten through--well, we'd be making our reports in hell. I think he deserves recognition."

Kirk had weighed the alternatives. Privately he shied from singling Dray out for special notice --that would only intensify the boy's personal dilemma.

"Gavin, could you handle it if I asked you to wait?"

"Yes, sir. But why?"